

'Revealing and Chilling'

STATINTL

A Breathtaking Biography of Gamal Abdel Nasser

By Chalmers M. Roberts

ITEM: On June 23, 1965, Chou En-lai told Gamal Abdel Nasser over dinner in Cairo that he did not want President Johnson to withdraw troops from Vietnam; rather, he wanted more Americans sent there. Why? Because "we are afraid that some American militarists may press for a nuclear attack on China" and therefore American involvement would be "an insurance policy against an attack" because the U.S. troops would be "so close to us they will be our hostages."

Item: In 1959 Nikita Khrushchev wrote Gamal Abdel Nasser that the Soviet Union had "feared" a year earlier to offer unlimited support to Egypt—"knowing your impulsiveness." In 1937, just before the Six Day War, Alexei Kossygin counseled Egypt to "compromise, to work politically" after Nasser had closed the Straits of Tiran.

Item: Nasser had an "instinctive dislike" for President Johnson because he had studied photographs of the new American President and was "shocked" at those in which Johnson had his feet on his desk and was showing off his operation scar. When the Soviet ambassador arrived in the middle of the night to deliver a Johnson message sent via Kossygin, Nasser took it as an effort to "neutralize" the Soviet Union in the Middle East.

THESE FRAGMENTS, and much more, are to be found in a forthcoming biography of Nasser by his friend and confidant, Mohammed Heikal, the highly influential editor of Cairo's Al Ahram. Excerpts from the book, to be published next year, have been running for some weeks in the London Sunday Telegraph. The items mentioned here are from those excerpts and while some of Heikal's reporting may be open to question, much of it has the ring of truth.

Of all the middle rank nations none has had greater importance for and influence on the superpowers than Egypt. Heikal's account is both revealing and chilling. It is revealing because it includes much new information on the Soviet attitude toward Egypt as well as some details of Kennedy and Johnson diplomacy in the Middle East plus a great deal about inter-Arab relationships. It is chilling because Heikal suggests that a sense of conspiracy and emotion rather than hard facts and analysis governed Nasser's critical decisions. What this implies for the current Sadat regime can only be guessed. Heikal's role today is as important as it was in Nasser's years.

What, for example, is one to believe about the tales of CIA intrigue recounted by Heikal? He writes of a CIA "leak" to Nasser that at the time of Suez, Anthony Eden was suffering a physical breakdown; of \$3 million paid by the CIA to Gen. Naguib to construct a communications tower in Cairo; of how the CIA induced a Russian sailor on a Soviet ship bringing the first arms to Egypt to defect and now the sailor was shipped out of Egypt in a diplomatic bag; of Kermit Roosevelt's role in the 1956 invasion and how Americans, unnamed, tipped Egypt that the British had named a commander for the 1956 invasion.

THERE is an intriguing account of the origin of the 1955 Soviet arms deal, one of the monumental events of our times. As Heikal tells it, President Eisenhower was talked out of aiding Egypt by Prime Minister Churchill though John Foster Dulles was sympathetic to Nasser's request. But when Dulles temporized and worried about Nasser going to the Bandung Conference, it was Chou En-lai who set up the deal. At a stop in Rangoon en route to Bandung, Nehru introduced Nasser to Chou, and Nasser asked the Chinese Premier if he thought Moscow would supply him with arms. This, writes Heikal, was the "first overture of the Soviet arms deal."

The result was a call on Nasser by the Soviet ambassador in Cairo on May 21, 1955, and later a visit by a Russian colonel. Heikal says that Nasser told American Ambassador Byroade on May 22 that he had a firm Soviet offer. But Dulles was later to claim he had no solid information prior to the summit conferences that July and therefore Eisenhower had not raised the matter with Bulganin and Khrushchev at Geneva.

The Oct. 17 installment included statements by Chou to Nasser in 1965 that some American troops were beginning to try opium "and we are helping them" by "planting the best kinds of opium especially for the American soldiers in Vietnam." Chou, as Heikal tells it in direct quotations, explained that the West had long ago imposed opium on China and "we are going to fight them with their own weapons." Prophetically, Chou added—and this was in 1965 when the American troop involvement on a grand scale was only just beginning—that "the effect which this demoralization" through drugs "is going to have" on the United States "will be far greater than anyone realizes."

Heikal reports that Nasser subsequently told Averell Harriman of the first part of Chou's remarks but not about the drugs. It was, says Heikal, the only time in the two-hour Nasser-Harriman meeting that the American "showed any real interest" in the talks.

Chou's bitterness toward the Soviet Union also is deeply reflected in the Heikal account. When Nasser said the Soviets were helping Egypt, Chou replied that "they are not going to help you. They are only interested in helping themselves." The Russians complained that Nasser was getting too friendly with China and an unnamed Russian leader, says Heikal, rebuked an "insult" to the Soviet Union! Mao Tse-tung had sent his two sons to Moscow for training but when they returned to China, Mao asked what they had learned and when they told him Mao declared that "it was all non-sense and they had learned nothing" and sent them to a commune.

Heikal also recounts that China strongly opposed Nasser's acceptance of the ceasefire after the Six-Day War in 1967. Mao, reports Heikal, "sent Nasser a military plan of action" that called for breaking up the Egyptian army into guerilla brigades "which should lose themselves in the population." Nasser had to explain to the Chinese that the Sinai was no place for such tactics "but still the Chinese were not convinced."

There also is an account of a Nasser-ordered mission to Peking around this time to ask for Chinese help "in making a breakthrough in nuclear techniques," as Heikal describes it. Chou received the delegation kindly but explained that "nobody was going to give anybody anything as a gift. If the Egyptians wanted to step into the atomic field they would have to do it themselves" as China had done.

How much Heikal will disclose of Kossygin's diplomacy remains to be seen but there is plenty about Khrushchev's way of doing business. There is, for example, his remark to Nasser that Tito is "not a Communist, he is a king." More chilling is Khrushchev's statement to Nasser in the Kremlin in 1958, just after the coup in Iraq, when the Arab world expected an American invasion of Iraq, that "frankly, we are not ready for a confrontation. We are not ready for World War III." The most Khrushchev would promise by way of help to the Arabs was to announce Soviet maneuvers on the Bulgarian-Turkish border "but don't depend on anything more than that."

Nasser would not accept the idea of Israeli collusion with Britain and France in 1956 though his Paris embassy had paid an unnamed Frenchman for just such advance information. By the time of the Six Day War, however, Nasser was ready to believe in American collusion with Israel. As Heikal tells it, what convinced Nasser was an overflight of two American planes and a Johnson message via Kossygin delivered by the Soviet ambassador that the planes were on their way to help the American spy ship Liberty. Nasser even was affected by an American press account that President Johnson had remarked to his wife that "we have a war on our hands." "We" was equated with collusion.